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Ryan Rickelton's century helps South Africa beat Afghanistan in Karachi | AP

BLOCKBUSTER WEEKEND AS ARCH RIVALS FACE-OFF IN CT

Heavyweights England and Australia play on Saturday in Pakistan before the marquee India-Pakistan clash in Dubai on Sunday

ONE-SIDED CONTESTS FAIL TO GRAB EYEBALLS

If New Zealand beating Pakistan came as a spoiler for the local fans, on Friday, South Africa overpowered Afghanistan to establish their standing in Group B. In an event where one bad loss could ruin a team's chances, both Black Caps and Proteas seem to have consolidated their net run rate. This weekend could well decide the semifinalists

OLD FOES LOOK TO REIGNITE RIVALRY

- Both Australia and England are run down by injuries and the tournament needs the two teams to rise to the occasion and put on a show to stay in the reckoning for the knockout round
- The subcontinental contest hasn't been the same but the hosts Pakistan need a win to keep their hopes alive | MORE ON P17

2021

THE LAST TIME PAKISTAN BEAT INDIA AT AN ICC EVENT

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

$21 mn for 'voter turnout' deeply troubling: India

Trump labeling controversial USAID fund as kickback scheme sparks BJP-Cong sparring

JAYANTH JACOB @ New Delhi

INDIAN authorities are investigating "deeply troubling" reports raising "concerns about US government interference in India's internal affairs," following President Donald Trump's suggestion that a US agency spent money to influence elections.

On Thursday, Trump reiterated his criticism of the $21 million US government funding provided to India through USAID during the Biden administration for 'voter turnout', calling it a "kickback scheme" and adding: "What the hell do I care about it? We got enough problems (of our own)."

We have seen information on certain US activities and funding. These are deeply troubling

Randhir Jaiswal

"We have seen information that has been put out by the US administration regarding certain USAID activities and funding. These are obviously very deeply troubling. This has led to concerns about foreign interference in India's internal affairs. Relevant departments and agencies are looking into this matter," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said on Friday.

The Department of Government Efficiency headed by Elon Musk posted on X a list of funds disbursed by USAID, which included $21 million allocated for voter turnout in India.

"Relevant authorities are looking into, and hopefully we can come up with an update subsequently," Jaiswal said.

Trump, addressing a gathering of state Governors from his Republican Party, opined: "I would say in many cases, many of these cases, anytime you have no idea what we're talking about, that means there's a kickback because nobody has any idea what's going on there." He also questioned grants of $29 million to "strengthen the political landscape" in Bangladesh.

Building on Trump's "kickback" remark, BJP's Amit Malviya and Pradeep Bhandari alleged that the $21 million had been used to support "deep state assets" in India, accusing Rahul Gandhi and the "Congress ecosystem" of benefiting from the funds.

The Congress hit back, alleging the CIA had paid RSS to destablise the Congress governments in the past and demanded a white paper on USAID funds in the past decade.

AMID CROSS-BORDER FIRING, BOTH SIDES AGREE TO HONOUR TRUCE

FAYAZ WANI @ Srinagar

INDIA and Pakistan held a Brigade Commander-level flag meeting along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district on Friday, in an effort to de-escalate tension after several recent incidents of cross-border firing and an IED attack.

The flag meeting took place in the Chakkan-Da-Bagh crossing point area, with both sides highlighting the need to maintain peace along the border.

At the 75-minute-long meeting that started around 11 am, the Indian army delegation lodged a strong protest over recent instances of unprovoked cross-border firing, apart from infiltration attempts by terrorists and smuggling of narcotics and weapons.

The meeting took place in a congenial atmosphere and both sides agreed to honour the ceasefire agreement in the larger interest of peace along the border, sources said. "Pakistan army officials were warned of a befitting response in case of cross border firing," sources said.

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah welcomed the flag meeting, saying it's a good thing as it aims to reduce tension without using force.

Ceasefire violations along the border of Jammu and Kashmir have been uncommon since February 2021 when the two countries decided to strictly adhere to the November 2003 border ceasefire agreement. On February 10, an IED blast along the LoC in Akhnoor triggered by militants killed an army captain and a jawan. Another soldier was injured in the explosion.

The extent of damage on the Pakistani side in the retaliatory action was not known immediately but officials had said the enemy forces also suffered "heavy casualties."

Nine injectable drugs made in other states failed sterility tests, says Dinesh

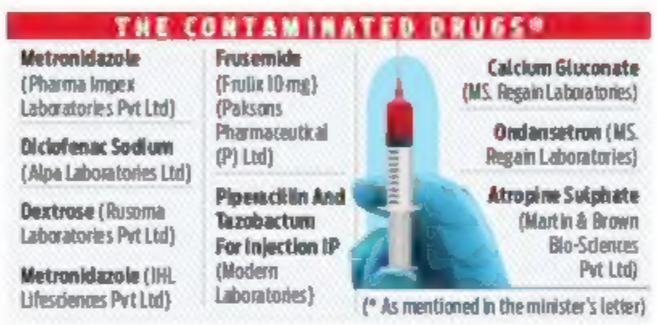
EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

EXPRESSING grave concern over several instances of sale of contaminated injectable drugs, Health Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao has urged Union Health Minister JP Nadda to create a system for all laboratories in states and those under the Centre to share alerts on drugs that have failed sterility tests.

In a letter to Nadda on February 20, Rao stated that nine injectable drugs, which have been manufactured in other states, failed sterility tests in government laboratories of Karnataka between January 1 and February 16. Rao said the list of drugs did not include injectables manufactured by Paschim Banga Pharmaceuticals based in West Bengal, whose contaminated injectables caused the death of five young mothers in Ballari district. Asserting that he has instructed health officials to take adequate steps to ensure these drugs are not sold in Karnataka, Rao stated that it is highly likely that contaminated drugs manufactured by these companies are sold in other states.

"Injectables, as you are aware, are used in acute care. Given the 'life or death' consequences for patients being administered these contaminated drugs, I request you to ensure all products sold by these companies are withdrawn from across India and these companies are not allowed to sell any drugs until they are inspected by the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation for compliance with Good Manufacturing Practices," Rao said.

He said, "In addition to the system to share alerts, there should be a legal requirement to share sales records from the manufacturer to enable seizure of contaminated drugs before they are given to patients," Rao said. It should alert doctors, pharmacists and patients, he added.


THE CONTAMINATED DRUGS*
Metronidazole (Pharma Impex Laboratories Pvt Ltd)
Diclofenac Sodium (Alpa Laboratories Ltd)
Dextrose (Rusoma Laboratories Pvt Ltd)
Metronidazole (IHL Lifesciences Pvt Ltd)
Frusemide (Frulix 10-mg) (Paksons Pharmaceutical (P) Ltd)
Piperacillin And Tazobactum For Injection IP (Modern Laboratories)
Calcium Gluconate (MS. Regain Laboratories)
Ondansetron (MS. Regain Laboratories)
Atropine Sulphate (Martin & Brown Bio-Sciences Pvt Ltd)
(* As mentioned in the minister's letter)

'UNACCEPTABLE'

Govt slams Erdogan's Kashmir take on Pak trip

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

INDIA has lodged a strong protest with Turkey over President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's remarks on Kashmir during his visit to Pakistan last week.

"We reject such objectionable comments on matters that are internal to India. We have lodged a strong protest with the Turkish ambassador. Such unwarranted statements on India's territorial integrity and sovereignty are unacceptable. Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

Last week, Erdogan following his talks with Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had said: "The Kashmir issue should be addressed according to the UN resolution through dialogue and keeping in mind the aspirations of the people of Kashmir... our state and our nation, as in the past, stands in solidarity with our Kashmiri brothers today."

India's stated position is that Kashmir is a bilateral issue where any third party has no role to play.

Meanwhile, during his recent meeting with Bangladesh interim government's foreign affairs advisor Touhid Hossain in Muscat, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar conveyed that Bangladesh "should not normalise terrorism," the spokesperson said.

The two leaders met on the sidelines of the 8th Indian Ocean Conference (IOC) in the Omani capital last week, where Hossain urged Jaishankar to consider convening a meeting of the SAARC Standing Committee.

Protesting sub-registrars force official to follow HC order

S LALITHA @ Bengaluru

SUB-REGISTRARS and senior sub-registrars, who have been staging an agitation at the office of the Inspector General of Registration and Commissioner of Stamps (IGR & CS) here since Thursday 4 pm, called off their protest around Friday 8 pm following an assurance by the commissioner.

The commissioner's office witnessed high drama when sub-registrars, many of them women, sat on chairs in front of IGR & CS K V Dayananda's chamber. Dayananda was not allowed to come out of his chamber. By 7.30 pm, he addressed the protesters and promised them to convey the decision taken by the government. However, they refused to budge and stated that they would continue their protest.

After some time, Dayananda called the association president and promised him that the sub-registrars would soon be given login access and allowed to work in previous posts. This message was conveyed to them by the association president, who placed his mobile on speaker mode, when Dayananda made the announcement.

In all, 90 sub-registrars and senior sub-registrars obtained a stay order on February 18 against their transfer by the revenue department on December 10, 2024.

With the department not complying with the stay order, around 40 of them, who are members of the Karnataka State Stamps and Registration Department Employees' Association, launched the protest on Thursday.

CONTINUED ON P5

REDUCED TO ASHES

Fire personnel dousing the blaze atop Chamundi Hills in Mysuru on Friday. Hundreds of acres of forest land were destroyed in the fire. DCF Mysuru Division K N Basavaraju said the fire was noticed at 12.30 pm in the forest near Uttanahalli and Lalithadripura. It is suspected that miscreants set fire to the dry grass in the forest area | VIJAYAKUMAR S

EXPRESS READ

Union education minister Pradhan, TN CM Stalin trade barbs over NEP

NEW DELHI: The war of words over NEP between Centre and DMK intensified with Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan accusing TN govt of turning 'progressive reforms into threats for politics' & CM Stalin dubbing NEP a tool to promote Hindi P5

'Notable development': Jaishankar says after meeting China FM

NEW DELHI : There have been notable developments in India-China relationship since Nov 2024, including management of peace and tranquility in the border areas, EAM S Jaishankar said during his meeting with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi

KSRTC conductor attacked for not speaking Marathi

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Belagavi

A group of Marathi-speaking people assaulted a KSRTC bus conductor for not speaking Marathi with passengers at Balekundri near here on Friday. Conductor Mahadev Hukkeri was admitted to Belagavi civil hospital with injuries. When a woman asked for a free ticket in Marathi, Mahadev told her that he did not understand that language and requested her to speak Kannada.

This led to an argument between the conductor and some Marathi-speaking passengers on the bus. When the bus reached Balekundri, the group entered the bus and assaulted Mahadev. Mahadev told reporters that when the argument broke out, some passengers abused him and threatened him with dire consequences for not speaking Marathi.

When the bus reached Balekundri, many people entered the bus and started assaulting him. They did not listen to his request not to assault him, he said. A video clip of people assaulting the conductor has gone viral, drawing sharp reactions from various Kannada organisations in the district.

Deputy Commissioner of Police Rohan Jagadish said action will be initiated against those who had assaulted Mahadev. A case has been registered at Marihal police station.

Meanwhile, several Kannada organisations condemned the attack on the bus conductor.

DCP Rohan Jagadish visits KSRTC bus conductor Mahadev Hukkeri at Belagavi civil hospital on Friday | EXPRESS

GREAT ESCAPE

God's own team: Kerala finds divine touch to enter maiden Ranji final

FIROZ MIRZA @ Chennai

THIS seemed to have jumped straight out of Ripley's Believe It or Not show. Call it providence, sheer luck or tenacity, Kerala lived up to its moniker God's Own Country. The team needed divine intervention to make a match out of the semifinal against Gujarat in Ahmedabad, just like they did in the quarterfinal match against Jammu and Kashmir.

Kerala started on the back foot on the last day of their Ranji Trophy semifinal at the gigantic Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad on Friday. Hosts Gujarat needed just two runs to reach Kerala's first innings score of 457, when No 10 batter Arzan Nagwaswalla hit a ball to the leg side. Instead it flew to the short leg and hit Salman Nizar's helmet — the Man of the Match in the quarterfinal against J&K where Kerala managed to take just one-run lead from a desperate situation. Nizar turned the saviour once again. The ball ricocheted off the helmet and flew over the head of the batter and wicketkeeper Mohammed Azharuddeen. Time almost stopped and so did their hearts. As the ball quietly lodged into the safe hands of skipper Sachin Baby, Kerala players could hardly believe what happened. Wild celebration ensued and lasted until the end of the day. Kerala, who made their debut in 1957, took the all important two-run lead and at the end of the day it made sure it made it to its maiden Ranji final against Vidarbha who beat Mumbai on Friday, from February 26.

If a magical last-wicket 81-run partnership saved Kerala against J&K, a helmet intervention saved them the day. The Kerala skipper admitted God has been kind to them. "There was a help from the Almighty I would say," Baby told this daily while recalling those anxious moments.

"We have been putting our efforts and at the same time God has been kind in the last four matches. Before me, it has been a dream of every Kerala captain to lift the Ranji Trophy. I hope God remains kind and I fulfill our dream." P17

Kerala celebrates after edging past Gujarat on the basis of first innings lead | EXPRESS